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ABSTRACT

Grandparenting and grandparents themselves come in many guises--young and full of vigor, old and ailing, filled with joy or burdened with concerns. For the first time in history a large number of grandparents are living long enough to get to know their grandchildren. Grandparents today are diverse in culture, financial status, health, emotional stability, and age. The larger number of grandparents, increasing independence of many grandparents thanks to pension plans and Social Security, and wider outside interests have brought multiple benefits for older and younger generations. These same factors often result in greater complications. As grandparents have more time to share, emotionally and financially, in the financial, health and social problems of children and grandchildren, they become more intricately interlaced with the lives of other generations. A few of the dilemmas which surface in the current grandparental life include divorce; stepgrandchildren; serving as "bankers" for younger generations; the "parenting" grandparent; the out-of-wedlock grandchild; the "different" grandchild; the difficult grandchild; the other nationality grandchild; the religiously different grandchild; and destructive relationships. Many new roles exist in the arena of grandparenting. Great-grandparents have emerged as forces in family structure. Grandparents, in a sense, have come into their own. (ABL)

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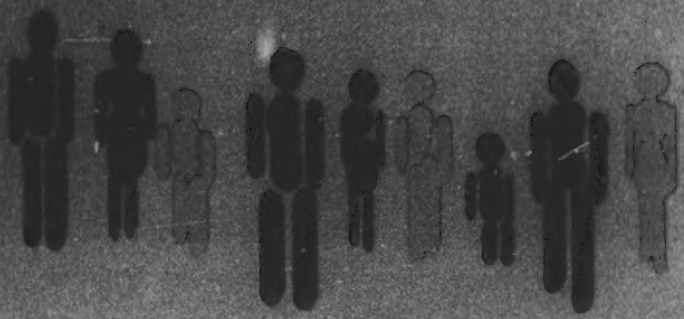

GRANDPARENTING IN TODAY'S WORLD

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GRANDPARENTING IN TODAY'S WORLD

by Bert Kruger Smith

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Foreword

Being a grandparent means that, when everyone recites "over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go" at Thanksgiving time, they're talking about *YOU*! They're coming to *your house*! Becoming a grandparent for the first time evokes mixed feelings that soon give way to pride and happiness in the newfound status.

Grandparenting has many connotations. For some it is the joyous moment when one first witnesses the child of one's child and feels the surge of hope, of promise, and of extended love.

Or—grandparenting may represent new burdens at a time of life when living itself makes demands often beyond one's energies. The divorced son or daughter who brings "home" small children for parental nurturing places the grandparent in a new and often unwanted role.

Probably the saddest role for any grandparent is having to assume the entire task of rearing a grandchild when the parent has died or has become seriously ill. Then the anguish concerning the son or daugher, combined with the responsibility of care of a grandchild, imposes a chore which may overwhelm the grandparent.

Thus, grandparenting and grandparents themselves come in many guises—young and full of vigor, old and ailing, filled with joy or burdened with concerns. No one picture can be painted of grandparents in this culture. The only reality is that grandparenting is a stage of life which may be filled with multiple delights or, conversely, with major worries.

Bert Kruger Smith discusses the problems that some grandparents face in today's changing world, with special sections on divorce, stepgrandchildren, money problems, the "parenting" grandparent, and the grandchild who is born out of wedlock, or the one who is difficult or just different in religion or nationality. Examples are offered of upbeat solutions to contemporary dilemmas that inspire the reader to pause and reflect.

Anyone who has had a grandparent, is a grandparent, or plans to be a grandparent would do well to give this essay some careful study.

Wayne and Joan Holtzman, *grandparents*

GRANDPARENTING IN TODAY'S WORLD

"A grandma is made to spoil and save you from your parents."

"A grandmother comes to football games and cheers when she doesn't know what's happening."

"What is a grandmother? Someone who tells you the bad things your mother did when she was a little girl."[1]

These statements sum up succinctly some views of present-day grandparents.

Grandparenting in today's world. How much has it changed from earlier years? Is today's American grandparent just another version of the old grandparent in more modern dress? Or, is the change a vital one? For example, a working grandmother may foreswear a business luncheon one weekend for the opportunity to take a grandson to "Sesame Street." *But* that same grandparent with office appointments may have to decline sitting with that same grandson when he becomes ill and his working parents need some help.

Has the stereotyped grandmother taking warm cookies from the oven and rocking infants disappeared totally? Is the whittling, whistling grandfather who takes a grandson fishing now spending his time on the golf course or at the stockbroker's office?

More importantly, perhaps, is the current generation of young people cheated by the possible loss of such old-fashioned role models?

Another question might be: Was the old-time grandparent real as portrayed? Or were there many variations, even early in the century, of the kinds of grandparents possible?

Grandparents, at least in great number, are a fairly recent phenomenon. For the first time in history a large number of grandparents are living long enough to get to know their grandchildren. With increasing life expectancy, three generation families are usual, and four and five generation families are not uncommon. A 10-year-old today has better than one chance in two of having three living grandparents, and one chance in six of having all four alive.[2]

What Is Today's Grandparent Like?

Whom are we considering in our discussion? It would be easy to fall into the cliche that "they" are of a certain dimension. However, the one truth which we all know is that the group is diverse in culture, financial status, health, emotional stability, and age.

There is a myth which says that grandparents are loving, tolerant, accepting, and available. However, domineering women do not turn into angelic grandmothers just because their daughters give birth. Nor do strict fathers automatically become indulgent grandfathers at the same time. What we are and who we are remain fundamentally unchanged.

The description of grandparents cannot be simplistic. They come in all sizes and temperatures. They are tall and short and too fat or very thin. Their temperatures range, in the tradition of the Three Bears' porridge, from being too hot, smothering chil-

dren with attention, to being too cold, keeping emotional distance. Some, however, are just right, warm enough to make a difference.

Grandparenting is not a worry-free state. If children reflect on one, grandchildren do even more so, unless one can consider that personal fine genes have been watered down by the spouse of a son or daughter.

If one finds grandchildren too materialistic, overly absorbed with acquisition of goods rather than ideas, then a look in the mirror might remind one what values have traveled down the generations.

The state of grandparenting can be a gift or a curse, reward or punishment. Many people have said, "I used to tell her I hoped she'd have a kid as troublesome as she was. Now I laugh when my daughter complains about her child."

Or, others take credit for a grandchild's fine mind, social commitment, or musical ability. "Just like I used to be," they say.

In this modern era there are many people in their 40s, perhaps women who have careers, who may be called upon to babysit a grandchild on a Saturday morning and also may be staying with an aged grandparent later that same evening. Like the Roman god Janus, this person looks both backward into the former generation and ahead into the future one. Five generation families are not that uncommon in this era of longer life and, more significantly, of a larger contingent of old people in our society.

Many grandparents are widows—far too many, for women live longer than men in our society. Sometimes they turn grandchildren into surrogate mates, taking them on trips and relying on them for adult companionship.

There are even surrogate grandparents, persons who do not have grandchildren of their own. They may be found volunteering in schools and correction departments, being friends to little ones with special needs.

Some grandparents are children of immigrants who knew their own grandparents as foreigners with a different language and habits unlike their own. Do today's grandchildren see their

American-born grandparents in such an unfamiliar way? Probably so. The dress may be less unlike their mother's than in earlier generations, but values and interests may be as foreign as if the two generations had come from different countries. In the Kahlil Gibran sense ". . . [grandchildren's] souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams."[3]

Some of the Dilemmas of the New Grandparents

The larger numbers of grandparents, increasing independence of many grandparents thanks to pension plans and Social Security, and wider outside interests have brought multiple benefits for older and younger generations. These same factors often result in greater complications. For example, as grandparents have more time to share, emotionally and financially, in the financial, health, and social problems of children and grandchildren, they become more intricately interlaced with the lives of other generations.

The first dilemma might be how to balance independence with interdependence. The answer might be one which was stated in reply to the question of how porcupines stay warm in the winter. The response was that they came close enough to one another to get warmth from other bodies but far enough away not to feel the other's quills. In this society we have learned to value our ability to live our own lives and to "do our own thing." Yet our need for one another, for caring others, has not diminished. Sigmund Freud has said that what people need is work to do and people to love. Thus, grandparents want both their own lives and some involvement in the lives of those they cherish.

Now, from the viewpoints of our children, this independence has both positive and negative aspects. The self-sufficient, financially secure grandparents may not impact greatly on the lives of the young. Their emotional absence may mean they will not be

present to nurture the very young or to grow close to them emotionally. On the other hand, such grandparents will not be sitting by the telephone waiting for familial attention, and this may free the young from feelings of guilt that they are not giving enough attention to the older family members.

Second, how can this new grandparent sustain emotional ties with grandchildren of divorce? If the one-time daughter-in-law moves away with the children, either emotionally or geographically, what can the grandparents do to retain relationships?

Third, what does the new American grandparent do when the grandchildren are products of a mixed marriage, either religious or ethnic? Can prejudices be overcome, differences forgotten? Can one see the child behind the religion or race?

Fourth, how can grandparents be even-handed with all grandchildren? Since families are not created equal, relationships between members may vary from distant to very close. The children of a psychologically distant family branch may have a far different relationship with grandparents than the children of an emotionally close one. Conversely, grandparents may well not feel the same warm emotion with one set of grandchildren as with another. Can, or should, grandparents treat all alike?

Fifth, how can honest relationships be maintained as grandchildren grow older? Where is the balance between indulgence and sternness? Can one be friends and withhold judgment? Can one love without accepting all aspects of the grandchild's life?

These are but a few of the dilemmas which surface in current grandparental life. Let's look more closely at some of them.

Divorce

Divorce, along with all the complicating factors attendant to a child's separation from a spouse, probably provides one of the chief dilemmas for grandparents. Occurring as it does in approximately one out of two marriages, it affects not only the couple but, in some measure, the entire kinship structure. Since more

than 60 percent of divorcing couples have at least one minor child, it is easy to see that such marital separation impacts greatly on relationships with grandparents. A study on the effect of divorce on grandparenthood states the idea thus: ". . . [A] divorce disrupts the established links, changes the balance of resources within the extended family, and may well necessitate a renegotiation of existing bonds. . . . Divorce is an event that directly challenges the resource balance within a family system and, as such, poses a threat to its dynamic equilibrium. The manner in which divorce actually affects grandparents depends on a range of factors. In this research the relationship of the custodial parent to the grandparents was found to be an important element in the subsequent restructuring of bonds."[4]

Divorce, no matter how "friendly," impacts heavily on all generations. It is estimated that 40 percent of all children today will experience, while they are still minors, some kind of family separation. A further complication is that most parents of minor children may be expected to remarry, often someone who also is the parent of minor children. This move, then, involves the factors of stepgrandchildren and stepgrandparents.

The increased divorce rates among people of all ages also may mean that the grandparents are no longer married to each other. Because such intricate patterns of family life may result in grandparents' having less frequent contact with grandchildren, grandparents often fight for the right to have contact with their grandchildren. Recent court cases attest to the fact that many grandparents have taken to court cases involving their rights to visit with their grandchildren. The pain felt by grandparents in such circumstances is very often difficult for both parents and children.

Another possible effect of divorce might be that divorce in the middle generation creates a need for assistance from the older generation. As stated by Andrew Cherlin in *The New American Grandparent* ". . . divorce re-creates a functional role for grandparents similar to the roles they had when higher parental mor-

tality and lower standards of living necessitated more intergenerational assistance. . . . Children in divorced families today tend to develop stronger ties to their custodial grandparents than children in intact families develop with either set of grandparents."[5]

Neutrality does not come naturally in human relations. Yet the grandparents who are determined that they will maintain loving relationships with the children of divorced parents need to maintain a nonjudgmental attitude concerning the divorce. Taking sides with either parent or discussing either parent negatively with the grandchild can diminish chances that the grandparent will be able to reenter a familial relationship with the children.

Interestingly, studies have shown that it is common for the relationship between paternal grandmothers and their former daughters-in-law to continue. "This relationship transcends the divorce-related pressures for dissolution, most likely because the childrearing functions performed by women continue to be coordinated in the best interests of grandchildren and the continuity between generations."[6]

The divorce process is an illuminating period in which to study grandparenting because relationships are usually redefined during the reorganization of a child's family. Observations from a study of Anglo middle-class women revealed that most of the grandparents interviewed did not relish assuming a parental role but preferred the role of caring, loving, and occasional grandparent. When they were forced to assume the full-time commitment to their grandchildren, negative results often ensued. For example, the privacy of both the child and the grandparent was invaded, much to the dislike of both generations. The grandparents generally provided supports as the children needed them but preferred to make such aid available on a voluntary rather than an expected basis.[7]

Other studies have demonstrated that the age of the grandchild at the time of divorce and the relationship of the grandparent with the grandchild's parents are significant factors in the mainte-

nance of close relationships between grandparent and grandchild following a divorce. Another factor is, of course, the geographic proximity of the child and the grandparent.

Stepgrandchildren

The situation of stepgrandparents is, of course, directly related to the remarriage of children. When "new" grandchildren enter a family, can there be instant affection and mutual love? Most likely not. The possible rivalry between the children themselves, the difficulties experienced by the children's parents, and the stress of attempting to meld families can influence the relationships of the grandparents.

However, one study showed that what cements ties between the generations is the effort of various members to make the new relationships work. One stepgrandparent is quoted as saying, "Blood doesn't make a family."[8]

Difficulties do persist. When, as most often happens, the stepgrandchildren have living "blood" grandparents, the resolution of any possible rivalry between the two groups may be difficult. If the "real" grandparents are affluent, do the "new" grandparents have to be even-handed in the giving of gifts? Is even-handedness necessary or even desirable?

Bankers

Grandparents often are persons who have lived through depression years and who have saved their money. Among the middle class, the homes are often paid for and money reserves are secure. Many times their own children are struggling with high mortgage payments, college costs, or new businesses. When the grandchildren reach adulthood or college age, they frequently turn to the grandparents for money.

What, then, is the best role for the grandparents? Much depends, of course, on the relationship between members of the two generations. If a grandchild has been indifferent to the grandparent and has extended himself in only a minimal way toward that person, it is unlikely that the grandparent will feel very loving or eager to make a loan or an outright gift to the young person.

On the other hand, when the two generations have been close, when the welfare of each has been the concern of the other, it is likely that the grandparent will supply, willingly, the funds for a young person to go to college, visit Europe, or make the down payment on a home or business.

This "banking role" is fairly new, at least to the extent it now is practiced. ". . . Grandparents are likely to be increasingly important as a source of financial reserves—an insurance policy against family crises or a source of assistance for major purchases—but not as a source of regular income support . . . Occasional large transfers of assets allow grandparents to make an important contribution while retaining most of their regular flow of income for their own use. . . . And by compartmentalizing financial transfers, this system does not interfere with the preferred day-to-day emphasis on companionship."[9]

The "Parenting" Grandparent

Divorce, death in the family, serious parental problems, or major health needs may place the grandparent *in loco parentis*. This "misplaced" function can bring difficulties to all generations. The parental role becomes an unidentified one, depending on the relationships and the circumstances. If one parent remains in the home, how does the grandparent handle discipline? Who makes decisions about what the children may and may not do? The relationships between grandparent and grandchild change dramatically when the usually indulgent grandparent suddenly becomes the taskmaster and rules setter.

What is the role of the grandparent who assumes the parenting position while a daughter finishes school, gets professional training, or takes on a prolonged professional assignment elsewhere? Does the grandparent assume total responsibility for the child, including the disciplinary functions, or are there set limits which must be delineated?

Grandparents who have to assume such duties have usually been independent individuals for a number of years. They are older and less energetic than when their own children were little. They have not been recently involved in school or nursery activities; their peers are not involved with small children. Such grandparents are suddenly thrust into roles which they thought were long ago finished, and many of them have major difficulties in filling those roles successfully.

In communities around the country grandparents who are responsible for raising babies have asked for group sessions to help them learn to cope with the new duties. These groups meet with trained counselors who answer questions and advise participants on their choices in meeting the new challenge.

The Out-of-Wedlock Grandchild

The grandchild born out of wedlock poses a new dilemma for many grandparents. No longer is the mother sent out of town or out of the country to have her baby in some strange place and to put it up for adoption. Many young women who are pregnant but unmarried opt to have their babies and to keep them.

Does the new baby take its place along with legitimate grandchildren? Does the grandparent keep pictures to show off, take the infant with her or him to the store or to the park? Or, is the mother punished through the baby by indifference on the part of important others?

This dilemma needs to be worked through as grandparents meet it with disdain, anger, or, more rarely, with understanding and support.

The "Different" Grandchild

The child who suffers from mental or physical disabilities holds another kind of challenge for the grandparents as well as the parents. The usual pride one has in a child gives way, very often, to disappointment and regret.

Here the understanding grandparent can play a major role in giving support, physical and moral, to the parents and to the child himself. To be able to help the youngster feel good about himself, despite his disability, is to aim him in growing to his fullest capacity.

The Difficult Grandchild

The grandchild who is loving, caring, and happy brings joy to the grandparent. But some children seem unlovable from the moment of birth. Once again, the grandparent who can go emotionally inside the mind of the difficult youngster can often perform a major task in helping that child to grow into a more accepting and acceptable youngster than he would be without such assistance.

The Other Nationality Grandchild

If a son or daughter adopts a child of another culture, especially if the color of the skin or the facial features are very different from the family pattern, how do the grandparents react? The same factors are at play as in the instance of the difficult or different child. Some grandparents can support the courage of the children who undertake to bring an unlike child into the family; others cannot bring themselves into such total acceptance.

The Religiously Different Grandchild

When a grandchild or stepgrandchild is of a religion different from one's own, the grandparent, again, is tested in terms of acceptance. Supporting the child and also supporting the grandchild can help to strengthen the family and enhance the relationships. For grandparents who are extremely religious, such acceptance may be difficult but nonetheless important.

Destructive Relationships

Another factor at work in the parent-grandparent relationship is the residue of old emotions. Mothers and daughters who have never related well may now open old wounds over the treatment of the next generation. A daughter can get "even" with her mother for being over-strict by acting in that same capacity concerning her mother's relation to her child. This residue can become poisonous unless both parties are wise enough to try to resolve problems in mature fashion. If they cannot manage to do so without help, they need to seek professional guidance.

People growing older often feel resentment and jealousy of the young, of their energy, their looks, their capabilities. This resentment may deepen as the older person feels useless and unnecessary in the lives of others. Such feelings can transmit themselves into relationships with married children and with their children.

Another point of discord may come from the grandparent's "buying love" with a grandchild. Perhaps statements from children themselves may illustrate this point. "A grandmother is that one who gives you a Christmas present your mother didn't want you to have." And another one, "What is a grandmother? When my mother was little, she liked my grandmother. Now I sometimes have to protect my grandmother when my mother scolds her."[10]

To Sum It Up

Grandparents serve in many roles, in multiple fashion, with varying degrees of satisfaction. Vern L. Bengtson and Joan Robertson, in studying grandparenthood, have searched out the various meanings of grandparenting. They found that the symbolic expressions of the role are as important and as varied as are the behaviors the grandparents perform. They write, ". . . these symbolic functions, and the multiple meanings they reflect, are crucial to our understanding of grandparenthood . . . four of these symbolic dimensions: (1) simply "being there," (2) as the "national guard" or "family watchdog," (3) as arbitrators, and (4) as active participants in the family's social construction of its history.[11]

What all of this adds up to is that grandparents, in a sense, have come into their own. The sheer number of grandparents, the emotional satisfactions which frequently permeate all generations, and the varied roles which many grandparents undertake make the role an emerging and important one.

What Are the New Roles?

Many new roles exist in the arena of grandparenting. For example, in Miami a retired electrician who could not live alone, whose daughter did not have room for him, who did not want to live in a nursing home, advertised for a young family to share his home. A single mother with two children responded, to the delight of all. Said one of the children, "He makes real good suppers, real good salads, too. And he's teaching me the Morse Code and how to write poetry."[12]

In Albuquerque an unusual program brings together young people and old ones in an intergenerational interaction which

benefits both groups. The children at the St. Francis Child Care Center and residents of the adjacent St. Frances Garden nursing home are brought together for mutual love and recreation.[13]

Also in Albuquerque a widowed grandmother created a "Rent-a-Granny" program which places retired people in positions with children and in a variety of other jobs.

Another new phenomenon is the emergence of great-grandparents as forces in family structure. Although most of the great-grandparents surveyed said that they did not want to undertake the upbringing of their small great-grandchildren, they valued the sense of familial immortality that the children represented. A recent study concludes thus: ". . . it seemed that although great-grandparents lived in times of significant family change and have experienced family crises, they adapted to new situations and changed circumstances. And though they may face these conditions with reluctance, difficulty, and sorrow, they remained active members of larger family units and sought to help and provide for their families to the degree to which they were able."[14]

Grandparenting in today's world is not a static state, despite the T-shirts showing a grandmother holding cookies which she is serving to a tiny dinosaur. The shirt bears the title "Grandmasaurus." A look at grandparenting is not a simplistic gaze at a single phenomenon. It is a complex, often difficult, often rewarding state of being which calls for wisdom, courage, and flexibility. Every generation begins anew. Every generation is different.

Anthropologists and historians help us to see change in perspective. The late Margaret Mead brought the situation into focus with the commentary that it is useful to distinguish between those societies in which change is so slow that the child sees its own future as it observes its grandparents (postfigurative societies); societies in fairly rapid change is which a large proportion of children learn from their peers who are at the same stage of learning as themselves (configurative societies); and societies like

the post World War II world, in which the experience of children differs so markedly from that of their parents or grandparents that elders must also learn from the experience of the children.

In the Margaret Mead sense, then, all generations are immigrants, too—immigrants of the future in which grandchildren will live. Margaret Mead continued her statements by saying that the strength that comes from sense of continuity with the past and hope for the future is sorely needed.

Thus roles as grandparents go beyond individual loved ones in the larger society. Another anthropologist, Margaret Clark, stated the following: "We have the capacity, as we know, for creating the kind of world we want to live in—if we can keep the sources of power out of the hands of demagogues and warmongers.

"With the birth of meaning, something totally new has entered our planet.

"There are people today who tempt us to keep defining ourselves, and our relationships to each other, within the frozen, crystallized structures of the past. Don't be tempted into believing that it is 'human nature' to kill, to destroy, to abandon the elders, to be 'tough.' The whole history of the species gives the lie to these fallacies."[15]

An even broader futures look was made by Dr. Bertram Brown: "Most of us, a great majority, learn to love our children and our grandchildren; its reciprocal is equally valid—the love of children for their parents and grandparents. But until we make the jump towards loving our grandchildren's grandchildren, make the spiritual leap into caring for the most far distant future, we will not be able to make the sort of decisions in our daily life and in our social and public policies essential for survival, security, and mental health."[16]

Epilogue

Perhaps the sentiments in one grandparent's letter[17] may sum up what grandparenting is like in today's world:

Dearest Grandson:

You unfold this letter from grandmother, wondering if you will have time before your soccer game to read through it—maybe wondering if it is worth perusing. If that is the case, put this letter aside until someday when you are home alone or bed-bound by a brief illness and take it out at that time.

. . . My love for you is so pervasive, so overwhelming that, surely, it must flow within you. Your world is different; your old age will be unlike my own. Yet we share the human need for love, the human concern against injustice, the human anger that prejudice or discrimination still exist. Perhaps you will be able to change what our generation could not.

I think frequently of what life will be like for you when you are old. It is hard to project my own thoughts into the coming century. If I could do so, I would put a protective covering over you, my child, in order that you could go through life without knowing devastating grief or war or gross disappointment. I look at my veined hands. They could not save you from a minor fall. Yet somehow I believe that the power of love does offer shelter against disaster.

If possible I would empty my pockets of gifts of wisdom, but I have so little. All I can do is hope that your old age will be filled with compassion and companionship and that you will grow to be an old person who illuminates your own life and the lives of many others. . . .

I love you, my dear. I hold you close.

Your grandmother

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